

DIONYSUS AND SHIVA: FAR AWAY SO CLOSE

By Chiara Baldini



One of the most popular “icons” in Psytrance culture is the Indian god Shiva, but what kind of divinity is he and which is the philosophy behind his cult? And is the cult of Shiva a strictly oriental creation or can we also find in western culture a similar tradition?

The reason for the presence of Shiva in trance parties lies in the influence that Shivaite philosophy and way of life exerted on the westerners who went to India and started the phenomenon of Goa-trance. In fact the age-old cult of Shiva, still kept alive nowadays by the *sadhus* (wandering Shiva sages) consists in **living a peaceful life outside the rules of society**, with few clothes, little food, dedicated to the ritual consumption of hashish and to the practice of sacred erotic rituals: a conduct which deeply resonated with the new-born hippy lifestyle, providing hippies (and later trancers) with the possibility to understand the “divine” aspect of this way of living. Furthermore it was the sacredness granted by Shivaite to collective trance dancing and use of psychoactive substances that contributed to the concept of **trance parties as sacred rituals**, as often stated by Goa Gil, who was initiated in a *sadhu* order himself.



But this “cult of nature” is not typical of Indian culture only and it is actually considered one of the most ancient and worldwide spread religious traditions, aside from that of the Great Mother to which it is complementary. According to the American mythologist Joseph Campbell, Shiva is just another name given to the same archetype, or *godform*, whose worship is **primary in all cultures**, since it **teaches respect for the dignity and sanctity of all nature**. Examples of this archetype in the various cultures are: the Polynesian Maui, the Hopi Masau’u, the Yoruba Ochosi, the Aztec Xochipilli, etc. In the western tradition the *godform* most similar to Shiva can be identified with the Greek **Dionysus**, as evidenced by a “remarkable pattern of correspondences between the two deities, arising from the comparative study of mythology and literature” as noted by Alain Danielou, the French specialist on India's religions and philosophies, in his “Gods of Love and Ecstasy: the Traditions of Shiva and Dionysus”.

The similarities between the two cults lie in **their essence as nature religions**, spiritual practices aimed at celebrating the divine aspect of human’s natural instincts and the deep communion shared by the “human animal” with savage life and the entire cosmos. Dionysus and Shiva are **gods of vegetation**, protectors of animals and trees, dressed with the skins of wild animals, living in forests and mountains. They are both “**archetypal images of indestructible life**”, personifications of that **vital energy**, known by the Greeks as **Zoe**: nature’s constant and endless drive to re-generate and maintain life. This vital energy is conventionally represented by symbols associated to both cults, like the **Bull**, the **Phallus** (or **Lingam** in case of Shiva) and the **Snake**, which identify both deities as **fertility gods**, personifications of the fertilising male principle. But both Shiva and Dionysus are also **androgynous young gods**, eternal adolescents with both male and female characteristics, spirits of playful energy, **tricksters** with creative, destructive and transformative powers, which reveal them as **ambivalent gods, shape-shifters**, expressing paradox, ambiguity and coincidence of opposites as the ultimate essence of the divine.



This ambivalence is mirrored also in their identity as **liminal gods**, masters of the altered state of consciousness, as both cultic practices (consisting mainly in **initiation rituals**) revolve around the **ecstatic experience** reached through collective trance dancing, ingestion of psychoactive substances and sacred erotic practices. “One must practice collective dancing. Rhythm gives rise to a state of trance which brings humans nearer to Shiva, the **Cosmic Dancer**”, recites a Shivaite text quoted by Danielou. Shiva is often portrayed holding a **percussive instrument** (a repetitive beats device!) and he is commonly associated with **bhang**, a drink made with Indian hemp, and the practice of **Tantrism**, a tradition of erotico-magic sexuality. On the other side Dionysus is known as the “god of dancing”, “the loud one” and “god of wine” (which was commonly mixed with different herbs to “bring forth the gods and ancestral spirits”). He is celebrated with “rapturous group experiences, featuring dancing,

costumes, music, wine and ecstatic release out in nature”, often including a **very open approach to sexuality**, as evidenced by many “explicit” vase paintings and literary references. This has led to the modern concept of “**orgies**” as group sex, even if *orgazein* originally meant “**celebrations of Zoe**”, that vital energy manifesting as *eros*, or as the *enthusiasmos* of the dance, whose appearance during the rituals was invoked (and provoked) as a sign of the presence of the god himself among his followers.

The practice of these “techniques of ecstasy” often lead Shiva and Dionysus to be accused of **teaching the secrets of wisdom to the poor and humble**, for they can be practised regardless of the level of knowledge or the social position. Therefore the **profound wisdom**, which is possible to acquire through the ecstatic experience and consisting of the realisation of the deep interconnectedness of All, is **theoretically available to all sorts of people**. This is why both Shiva and Dionysus are known as “**liberating gods**” and “**healers**”, granting salvation from ignorance and deliverance from angst and fear. A good example of this liberating power is the image of the **Dance of Shiva**, where the god is portrayed dancing on a dwarf-demon whose name translate as “forgetful and ignorant demon”, symbolising the triumph over unawareness through the dance.



The **followers of Shiva and Dionysus** are known in the Indian and Greek cultures as sharing the same characteristics of the two gods: playfulness, joy of living, harmony with nature, but also a certain ambiguous “dark” aspect, as they are referred to as “**demonic children**” or “**heavenly delinquents**”. As Danielou informs us, in Shivaite tradition the god’s companions are described as “freakish, adventurous, vagabond, delinquent and wild young people, with unkempt hair, shouting in the storm, dancing, singing”. In Greece, the poet Hesiod describes the followers of Dionysus as “joyous vagabonds of heaven, dancers, musicians, acrobats, practical jokers and lazy. They press the grape and get drunk, they are perpetually overexcited, jolly fellows in search of good fortune”.

From a social point of view, Shiva and Dionysus, are considered **protectors of those who do not belong to conventional society, those who do not live a “normal” life and outlaws**. Their essence as symbols of the divinity of the laws of nature, in fact, tend to create a strong contrast with the “**city religions**”, the institutional religious practice aimed at the divinisation of man-made laws, based on civic conformity and the repression of natural instincts. This is the case in both Olympian religion (in the case of Dionysus) and the Aryan-vedic religion (in the case of Shiva), which tend to place these “**rebellious gods**” outside their official pantheon of gods. Historically, the periods of cultural evolution are those in which these two **opposing yet complementary tendencies** find a way to co-exist peacefully and respectfully, as in the case of Dionysian worship during the Hellenistic period. But when this balance is not achieved the result is **persecution, repression and demonization** of nature religions.



Therefore the reappearance of Shiva and Dionysus-like cults seems to be a characteristic of those periods in which, after a phase of repression, humans realise that they have lost the awareness of their profound interconnection with nature and spontaneously return to those beliefs and practices able to renew this awareness. For the historical moment in which we are living, often identified with the last phase of what the Hindus call Kali Yuga, or the Age of Conflicts, this tendency seems to be confirmed even by the ancient text Linga Purana: **“At the end of the Kali Yuga, the god Shiva will appear to re-establish the right path in secret and hidden form”** (1.40.12). From this point of view psytrance could be one of these “secret and hidden forms” under which the cult of nature reappears, as a way for modern people to re-establish the link with a very ancient stream of knowledge, a sort of **“universal religion”** whose teachings potentially constitute “the seed of the Golden Age of the future of humankind”.

For more info:

Alain Danielou: “Gods of Love and Ecstasy: the Traditions of Shiva and Dionysus” and “While the Gods Play: Shiva Oracles and the Predictions on the Cycles of History and the Destiny of Mankind”

Both very interesting books on the cult of nature and the cycles of history, even if Danielou, writing in the 1960s and 70s, still retains some old-fashioned ideas, such as considering racial mixing a “debasement”!

More on Dionysus:

Karoly Kerényi: “Dionysus: Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life”

Euripides: “The Bacchae”

A Greek tragedy with Dionysus as the main character, arriving in Greece to start his cult.

On comparative mythology:

Joseph Campbell: “The Masks of God” and “The Hero with a Thousand Faces”

On Goa Gil and his relation to Shivaism:

Michael McAteer: "Redefining the Ancient Tribal Ritual for the 21st century: Goa Gil and the Trance Dance Experience": <http://www.goagil.com/thesis.html>

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2010

